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MULTIPLE TRANSFERENCES IN COUPLE ANALYSIS

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"I have to tell you a secret about yourself. It might upset you. Your previous analyst, do you remember, she suggested to conclude the therapy and you didn't feel ready for that. But in fact, there was no alternative solution at hand, because she was dying."

Just one year after Anna and Mario have begun their couple analysis, our transference-countertransference dynamics, already marked by a great affective intensity and branching out in many directions are shaken by something happening within the session: the transference turns into an event, and the three of us are all involved.

The session is opened by Mario's pleased report of an evening spent with a friend of him, during which he had been able, for the first time again after many years, to enjoy listening to rock music at a loud volume and staying up late, eventually allowing himself to cancel his work appointments the next morning. He recalls that at the beginning of their relationship Anna told him that he was not allowed to go out while leaving her at home. Anna denies that this is true, but continues by picking up again the topic of her depressed mother, who couldn't accept her going out and having a good time with her female friends. Though Anna's move to a different town, after finishing secondary school, overlapped with

the worsening of her mother's fatal illness, she didn't feel up to the task of standing by her: she was too angry. When her mother died, Anna resolved to attend the funeral only with difficulty, wearing a red sweater. But she retained the burden, magnified by her father and brothers, of being the cause of this death. Anna never came back to settle down in her hometown, but instead moved to a big city. Mario had also arrived at the same place from far away, when he met Anna, who looked bewildered, frightened and always dressed in black.

Here I am, seized by the effects of *après-coup*, where trauma reproduction looks indeed as if brought on by "psychic reality and internal assault" (Andrè, 2009), but also characterized by the indefiniteness of its subject and object. The blow (*coup*), well expressed by the French translation of Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*, is inflicted in this case both on the analyst and the patients, regardless of their differences. The indissoluble link between death and separation strikes at us with violence, outlining once for all the main knot holding the couple tie as well as the whole analytic field.

The following session opens with Anna reporting a dream. *She is driving her car, focused on herself; it is dark outside. She passes a crossroads without stopping at the red traffic light and runs a motorcyclist over. She doesn't notice the collision, because there are no visible consequences. Anna doesn't stop, but flees: failure to assist.* Mario adds that in the dream Anna was afraid of being punished and was searched for by the police, but she has no memory of this. She refers to her own analyst instead, who supported her during a period when she was young and very needy of help. About her dream, Anna emphasizes the opposition between her own feeling of vitality and the motorcyclist's injury or death. Two dreams reported by Mario extend across current and past time, as well as present places and his country of origin, moving from fear of 'coming' too early in intercourse with Anna to a house still being built, whose unfinished steps force him to take a long detour in order to reach the seaside.

Thus there is a responsibility as well as a wish which Anna refuses to acknowledge, in spite of Mario's call; in this way he tightens and substantiates the knot in which he has caught himself for

having left his native land and mother tongue, fuelled by his family's expectations of social emancipation, but at the same time having betrayed his mission and destiny, as the youngest son, of staying for ever by his parents' side. The analyst, too, is doomed to be injured or killed by the scandalous vitality well represented by the red sweater, and to be identified with the red traffic light, whose prohibition is both exciting and revengeful.

The topic of their personal analyses, for both of them preceding the search for a couple analysis, dovetails with what I would like to call a mirroring pre-transference on my part. Anna and Mario were referred to me by a couple I had analysed in the past: as I had perceived a subtle feeling of dissatisfaction and incompleteness throughout the analytical process of the referring couple, I would never have expected that it would eventually result in a deep change of their couple relationship and come to a satisfying conclusion. It is likely, however, that a quantum of unresolved transference had been left over, since it needed extra time to be undone, by creeping into the on-going therapy, whose beginning had often to host the previous couple through the patients' dreams/phantasies and verbal exchanges. We had therefore to work through a complicated entanglement of *transference transferences* and *countertransference transferences*, which brought about a long period of silent progress (or sometimes not so much silent) of the analytical course of each partner together with the development of the couple dynamics.

The couple transference, thus, springs both from the transference of the previous couple, lending it both a highly idealized feature as well as a related hidden persecutory nuance, and from the individual transferences, which often turn the two partners either into brothers competing for me, or into allies trying to exclude or annihilate me. However, their continuous and careful measuring of the relational flow in each session or sequence of sessions always saved me from running the risk of appearing to stand by either of them: a dream reported by Anna, immediately counterpointed by a dream of Mario's; a period of foray into the internal world and the personal history of one, immediately to be followed by a similar spell for the other. Given the impossibility of oneself being the favourite, at least no other should be it, as Freud wrote in *Group psychology and Ego analysis* (1921). Since

the brother complex is one of the unconscious psychic organizers in all kinds of links (Kaes, 2008), these dynamics featuring mirroring and narcissistic as well as rivalling qualities point to their seepage into the couple relationship and the transferences which unfold during the therapeutic work (*fraternal transference*, *rivalling triangle* by Laplanche, communicating vessels metaphor by Brusset, 2003).

A very important point, mainly at the beginning of the analysis, was my functioning as a container, as a *widened envelope* (Houzel, 1996), and as a support to a work of shared weaving aimed at strengthening the fragile and unfinished couple boundaries, in which I was appointed with the task of holding and repairing each partner's faulty and scarcely protective *skin-ego*. The body (individual and couple body) becomes therefore a key topic, an indispensable intermediary for expressing what cannot be represented nor projected outside, because of the precariousness of the boundaries: according to Gaddini, the drama develops inside the body as the drama of a primary psychosomatic relationship *en suffrance*. A counterpoint to the bodily presence of the patients in the setting is my bodily countertransference, pervaded with hidden feelings of soreness, the need of repeatedly changing position, and the phantasy that a physical therapy could be of some help (they make me feel sick but could even cure me). The self-destructive side of the somatic suffering is closely linked to the depressive range, which is focused on some impossible mournings. Throughout the first period of analysis Anna and Mario are constantly caught up with Anna's pulmonary pathology, which recurs periodically, and at a certain point is diagnosed as bronchiectasis; the partners share specialist examinations, diagnostic and therapeutic uncertainties, even a lesser propensity towards antibiotic therapies, maybe because they perceive the resolving force of these therapies as too drastic compared to either homeopathic or physiotherapeutic options.

Bodily language, therefore, doesn't limit itself to signifying individual unrepresentable levels, but succeeds in expressing the couple suffering, thus becoming trans-individual; it results in an entanglement between an operatory aspect of Anna's, which includes affective distancing and a sexuality that leaves out the

other - and can also be defined as operatory - and Mario's disposition to act in order to fill all possible gaps and to silence every pain: the shared aim is to prevent whatever leakage of pain that might turn into words and listening. Later on, the physical illness is overshadowed and replaced by the metaphor of the home in dreams, associations and in the couple and family life. Now, a prevailing issue is the furnishing of their home which has been going on for many years, because each piece of furniture needs to be carefully thought about in order to fit the ideal of brightness and beauty pursued mostly by Anna. Their home has to be the opposite of their original ones: Anna's place was modest, simple and dark, pervaded by a deadly sense of not being liveable in, while Mario's home was poor and unrefined, built stone upon stone by his father, and starting from a previous destination as a cattle stable. Both houses are often described as oppressive and segregating from the surrounding world; whereas a nourishing maternal quality appears in Mario's dreams as a mild hilly landscape, lapped on by waters and inhabited by grazing animals.

The couple history is interspersed with a series of unworkable mournings, imposing upon them the obligation of a debt towards the preceding generation, impossible ever to be paid back. There is the theme of an uprooting from the origins, which is already inscribed in Anna's family history: her parents, from Southern Italian origins, moved to Turin before her birth; here her father worked in a factory, whilst her mother, after giving birth to many children that Anna was the youngest of, fell into a deep depressive condition, and was later on affected by an autoimmune disease which eventually led her to death. We already know that Anna reacted to these painful vicissitudes by inflicting on herself further tearing separations. The attraction which the outer-other world held for her, although opposed by her family, appears in the image of Anna as a little girl at the window of her dark and bare house whence she cannot move away because it would mean leaving her mother alone. Later on, in secondary school, she discovers the world of beauty and thoughtlessness in a group of female friends from a better social background. However, this otherness cannot be but traumatic when Anna decides to leave her family, the first time temporarily, during the period of her

mother's illness, and finally for good after her death, only to find herself in a state of void, affliction and lack of means.

Mario spent his childhood in a small village in the Middle East, where from a very young age he helped his father with sheep farming. He left home for the first time when seventeen, because of a girl with whom he had fallen in love; a few years later he went away definitively and signed on as a sailor, without being allowed to return to his homeland due to his avoidance of compulsory military service. Mario chose Italy as his adopted country, and spent himself working hard and studying, while maintaining an idealization of his homeland: there, an always welcoming and syntonio mother would be waiting for his coming back to brighten her up. Among the other children, the firstborn daughter had left home at sixteen years of age for an untimely marriage, and the second son had shown worsening psychic troubles culminating in being diagnosed with schizophrenia. At the time when the couple analysis began, Mario was working in a satisfying physiotherapy job, for which he had developed a mind-body approach of his own, while at the same time he was continuing his psychology education, pursuing the aim of becoming a psychotherapist.

From the very beginning the couple relationship was marked by a collusion between imitation mechanisms and Pygmalion effects aimed at cancelling differences and discontinuities. This is one possible meaning for Anna's choice to herself set out on an analysis and to begin a schooling in physiotherapy, with the economic support of Mario, just like in her adolescence, when her much older beloved brother supported her. When they come for my help, Anna is very insecure about her professional abilities, since she believes she will never have a reasonable number of patients. Mario emphasizes again and again that it's him who is the driving person in the family, while blaming Anna for being a spendthrift.

For Mario money means fulfilling the expectations of his mother that he embodies the brilliant son bound to succeed and endowed, unlike his father, with resources apt to protect him from difficulties and adversities of life and nature. On the other side, Anna views money as the key to the world of beauty and comfort,

inconceivable in her gloomy and careless family house. Mario produces and Anna spends it, in accordance with a quantitative/arithmetic formula that denies qualitative differences and will subsequently be transferred onto affective dynamics and the balance between requesting and giving.

When we began the therapeutic process, Anna bore depressive feelings and experiences, which she embodied with her colourless and shabby looks as well as with her tendency to weep when touching upon painful subjects related to her original family, or mainly to her mother. In his turn, Mario plays the role of doer and of reparative omnipotence, which are intended both for his mate and for his own family, his patients, friends and colleagues. Eventually Anna recovers some positive features of her mother-daughter relationship, particularly the memory of a state of utter bliss when as a small child she stayed in bed, cuddled and totally cared for by a very loving mother. A radical change took place when her mother fell into a deep depression; Anna recovered somewhat during middle school, when her youngest brother (Anna has four brothers, all of them much older than her) was very close and helpful to her, and later, at Art High School, when she discovered friendship and the cult of beauty. Mario begins to get in touch with less idealized features of his childhood, such as the need to satisfy the heavy demands laid on him by his father, who was constantly gripped by the anxiety of not being able to do it, and his mother's depressive attitudes. This turn may have been triggered by the political instability of his country, and then by his mother's death, which sets off a sharp crisis in the couple, because of the inability of both partners to live and share this mourning. Depression begins therefore to be distributed, making way for a new balance in the couple, where professional achievements, links with characters of their family histories, and their internal world accomplish a new mobility and possibility of exchange.

The envious and revengeful dead mother, not allowing her children to experience desires and to leave, because it would imply her own and their destruction, looms up as the couple's shared object, which I found myself embodying in the transference. The issue of separation is pivotal, since "the psychic impossibility to separate dominates on sexual, relational and

symptomatic life", in André's (2012) words, and strictly intertwined with transference: as Freud (1915-17) wrote, through the analytic cure transference must be decomposed into each one of its forms, just as the work of mourning gradually unties all the cathexes on representations pertaining to the lost object. According to André, when the ability to separate is not achieved, analytic work must move onto the borders of the setting, providing that continuity of being which Winnicott set as the kernel of growth processes: what is needed, therefore, is an attentive and holding presence, underlined by the rhythmic pace of the sessions and which is internal to them. The couple counterpoints this with a very discernible transference onto the frame (Bleger), which appears in the form of an absolute observance of the schedule and time of the sessions, and the ritualized modalities with which the physical space is used: Mario may put his personal belongings on the table, whereas Anna never does; Mario takes off his overcoat, while Anna has allowed herself to do that only after a few years of therapy. Only a resemblance of a transitional object is the water bottle, that in the first years of analysis the partners repeatedly exchange during the sessions; it is a steady and oppressive presence due to its concreteness, and perhaps also the representative of an autarkic feeding bottle which protects from the alien nourishment of analytic work.

We have therefore to confront a fusional and an anti-separative kernel, which is rooted in the partners' family histories and can be regarded as a real familiar myth. From it, transference and countertransference phenomena also spring, due to a shift from diachrony to synchrony (Losso). Here the shared myth, as an attempt to deny not-worked through losses, tells the story that separation and emancipation bring about injury and death to both sides. Accordingly, I am both the idealized therapist who can rescue the couple from the threatening separation, and the fusional and depressed mother who stifles all attempts to disengage, as they would damage her to death. These patterns are matched, on the one hand, by my impression that I can rely upon a patients-analyst relationship holding even in the face of the most violent turmoils, and, on the other, by my frequent feelings of inadequacy as to the complex dynamics and topics expressed in some sessions, just like a depressed and abandoned

mother who can't share her children's experiences in a world she will always feel a stranger to. So I am caught in the couple's myth: should the analysis arrive at a conclusion, it would be a failure, out of which they would both emerge shattered as a couple, and I as an analyst

However, my recurring feeling of a stalemate and of the circularity of the process, just to be astonished when, on the contrary, new developments are accomplished and recognized by the couple itself, might point at their need to go on surreptitiously for a while; thereby, my feared envy and retaliations are bypassed, and they can eventually unveil the achieved progresses, while rendering me harmless with a disarming narcissistic gratification.

When the idea of a feasible separation begins to bud, as in a dream of Mario's, in which *his mother allows him to throw away the blankets with childhood patterns, which she knitted and gave to the couple*, some sessions follow that are loaded with anxieties of injury. Desire, which finds no room in this couple with an occasional and difficult sexual relationship, peeps through in the character of the younger daughter, a strong-willed and go-ahead girl, whom Anna is barely able to understand, and into whom Mario invests his fragile desiring power. My difficulty in grasping the signals given by the couple of their dawning wish of separation, each time verbally unacknowledged, marks in an almost grotesque way an incident that happens lately, i.e. after a little less than five years of therapy: while I am setting up the office to welcome them, I get the feeling that there isn't room enough for the couple's chairs, only to realize, a few moments later, that I forgot to move a third one away. The children have grown up, the womb has become too narrow, it's time to let them go! As the separation draws closer, both partners resort to an identification which fluctuates between hysteric and provocative towards me, Anna with her looks (she makes her hair smooth), and Mario in his work activity (he intends to take a couple in therapy). Thereby, while in the dreams of both, the painful and enraged expectation appears that their place will be taken by others, Mario is ready to pass the transference torch to a new couple, which will assume the task of keeping alive what couldn't be worked through.

The analytic work with couples comprises an overlapping of transference-countertransference levels and of sequential or contemporary therapeutic processes. With this specific couple I am striving to follow their path through a temporal to-and-fro way, which encloses the past of previous individual analyses of the partners as well as of the referring couple's therapy, up to the future of the psychotherapeutic activity which one partner is embarking on. The significant difficulty in working through transferences and countertransferences has proved to be closely intertwined with the depressive dimension and the paradoxical coexistence of distancing and fusional tendencies, which lead to a wiping out of differences as well as to mutual rejection and unwelcoming, thereby avoiding separation. The mourning work which, as an analyst, I had to embark on, together with my patients, needs a continuous transference and countertransference analysis, which unfolds in a similar way to Freud's depiction in *Mourning and Melancholia* of the gradual undoing of cathexes onto the lost object.

Perhaps this work is beginning to bear fruit, since in one of the last sessions Anna is able to recount this dream: *we had to take a mother (maybe Mario's, but also resembling my mother) into analysis. I remember the two of us supporting this woman who was in a sorry state and could hardly stand. But we realize that she makes us slow down, and next time we leave her at home.*

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